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# Happily Ever After, Part Two

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Few conventions of the Hollywood cinema are as noticeable to its producers, to its audiences, and to its critics as that of the happy ending. The device has achieved international fame: the French and the Japanese borrow the term from the English, as did Bertolt Brecht and his collaborators for the opera Happy End (1929). The suggestion, accordingly, has been that the convention can be seen as specifically American, as Irving Thalberg once implied when he pointed out that an ending that succeeds in gloomy Russia won't necessarily work here.[1] In 1926, J. Stuart Blackton was even more chauvinistic:

> The happy ending is the natural heritage of a happy, democratic nation...Let us therefore not deride the happy endings, but give thanks to the motion picture for spreading the spirit of Happiness and Optimism throughout our land and for bringing Hope and Cheer and a glimpse of the Brighter side of life to the whole civilized world.[2]

It seems to me that as a fixture of Hollywood filmmaking of the classical period (1918 to about 1960), the happy ending is worth examination. I want to look at how the convention has functioned in Hollywood's own discourse and in mainstream film, particularly those films that pose problems for the happy ending.

Within the terms of Hollywood's own discourse, whether the happy ending succeeds depends on whether it is adequately motivated. The classical Hollywood cinema demands a narrative unity derived from cause and effect. The ending, as the final effect in the chain, should resolve the issues in some definite fashion. Screenplay manuals from 1915 to 1950 insist that the end of the narrative should arise from prior events. Since the most common chain of narrative cause and effect is that of a dynamic protagonist who seeks to achieve some goal, the achievement of the goal is a logical conclusion of the action; it is also a "happy" ending. The happy ending, then, is defensible if it conforms to canons of construction. When these canons are not followed, the happy ending becomes a problem. Screenplay manuals are dissatisfied with forced or tacked-on happy endings. The characters, writes Frances Marion, must be extricated in "a logical and dramatic way that brings them happiness."[3] The unmotivated happy ending is a failure, resulting from lack of craft or the interference of other hands.

Yet in a curious way, Hollywood's own discourse flirts with the unhappy ending -- not in its explicit precepts but in the very forms of argument employed. The screenplay manuals often enact the very struggle that is not supposed to occur in the films. Screenwriters writhe on the horns of the dilemma, twisting from advice about the need for unity to the demand that the audience not be depressed. The oddest, most dramatic example I know is Fritz Lang's essay, "Happily Ever After," from which this article takes its title. Written in 1948, the essay can be seen as attempting to further a certain conception of realism in the postwar American cinema. The bulk of Lang's essay attacks the convention of the happy ending on several grounds. Rules exist to be broken. The audience is not as immature as producers think. The happy ending enters the history of the drama rather late and embodies a specifically American optimism. After World War II, however, no one can be so naively optimistic. At this point, the reader expects Lang to plead for the validity of the unhappy denouement as both dramatically correct and morally salutory. But we can watch the essay pivot in a single paragraph:

> I believe in artistic rebellion. I think new approaches, new forms are needed to reflect the changed world we live in. But I don't think the only alternative to sugar is poison. If we keep our ears and eyes open, I think we shall discover that our audience is somewhat sickened by sugar but knows it is more nourishing and far safer than arsenic.[4]

Lang goes on to defend not the naive ending but the "affirmative" ending in which "virtue triumphs through struggle."[5] That is, a motivated ending. In short, after brooding over the war's effects on our lives, Lang's essay recovers itself by means of an abrupt, unexpected...happy ending.

If the problem of the happy ending as a convention peeps out symptomatically from Hollywood's overt statements, it emerges quite nakedly in the films themselves. I want to propose a small typology of ways that any ending in a classical film can be motivated, and then look at ways in which a few films have exploited the disruptive, inadequately-motivated happy end. But first, it will help to specify a little more what an ending is.

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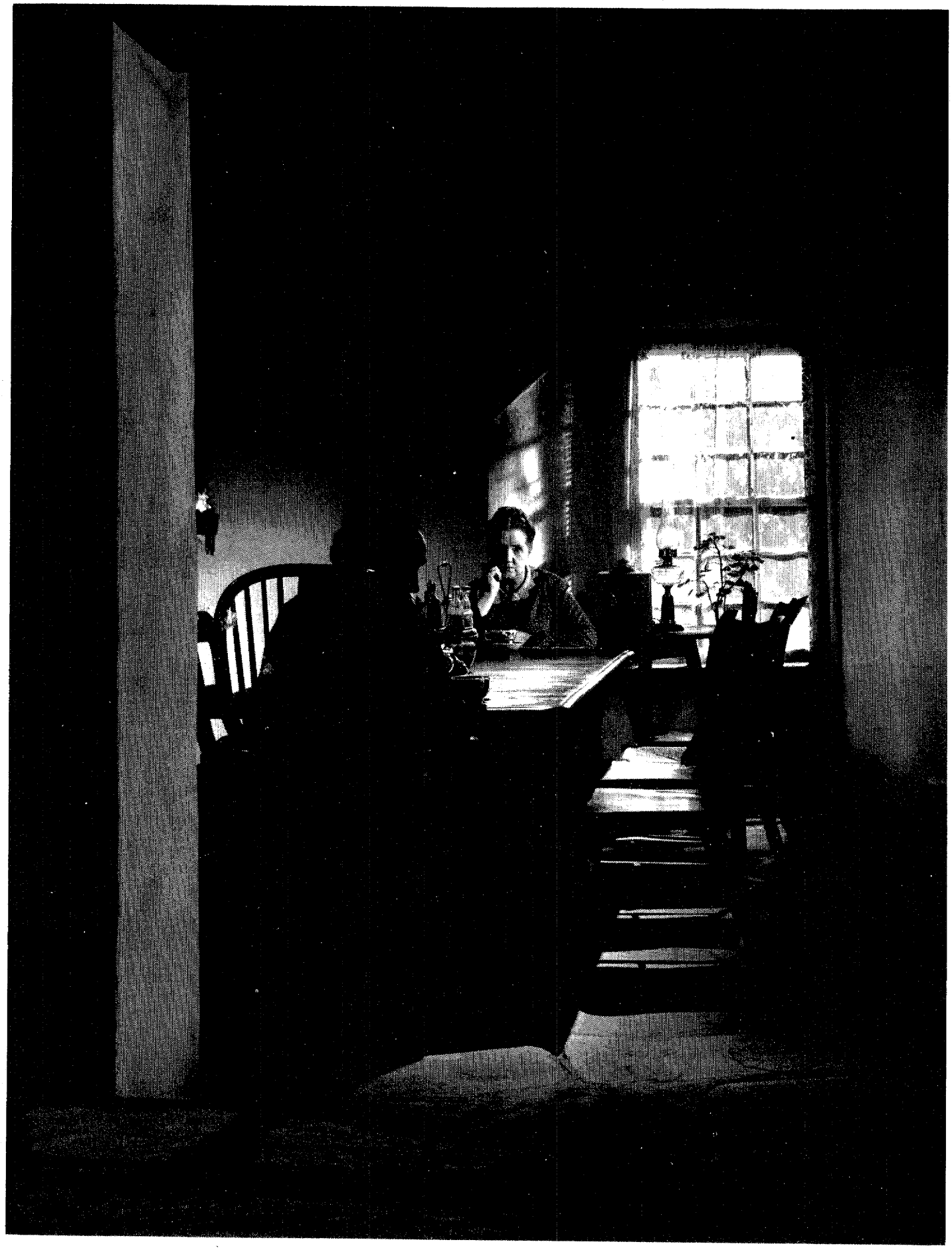
OPPOSITE: Donald Crisp and Sara Allgood in HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY.



"The uncaused resolution that borders on the miraculous." Borzage's SEVENTH HEAVEN.

In a classical Hollywood film, there are usually two concluding phases of the action. First there is the resolution, what Aristotle called the "untying." This is the overcoming of the obstacle, the achievement of the goal, the solution of the problem. In a Western, such as Winchester 73, the resolution occurs when the hero vanquishes the antagonist in a climactic shootout. But in most classical Hollywood films there is a final phase, which I shall call the epilogue (this may be quite short). The epilogue functions to represent the final stability achieved by the narrative: the characters' futures are settled. Frances Marion points out that the film should not end until "the expected rewards and penalties are meted...The final sequence should show the reaction of the protagonist when he has achieved his desire. Let the audience be satisfied that the future of the principals is settled."[6] Both the resolution and the epilogue constitute the film's ending, and both must be motivated. So, for example, Lin McAdam in Winchester 73 kills his brother to avenge the murder of his father, and his victory is anticipated by earlier scenes in which he is shown to be a better shot. The film's epilogue, a very short sequence, shows Lin returning to his friend and to the woman who loves him, and this is motivated not only by earlier action but also by the fact that he now has the rifle that he lost at the beginning of the film. The last shot, which tracks in to a close-up of the rifle, precisely echoes the first shot of the film and indicates the return to a stable narrative situation.

Some of the remarks already quoted from screenplay manuals indicate that both resolutions and epilogues can be motivated generically. That is, because the film is of a certain type, we expect it to conclude a certain way. In classical American cinema, the comedy, the detective film, the musical comedy, the romance film, and other genres typically carry the happy ending as a convention, while the gangster film and the film of social comment usually carry some expectation of an "unhappy" ending. In some cases, the genre can motivate an ending not adequately motivated by the film's internal logic. Consider a film like Sh! The Octopus (1936), a Warner Brothers grade-B comedy. After an hour of fanciful plot convolutions, the action is resolved by having one of the two bumbling protagonists wake up to discover that the action of the film has been his dream. Other genres spurn the "And then I woke up" resolution, but it is consonant with our expectations of how a farce might end.

From this standpoint, an unmotivated happy ending can arise from interferences across genres. The best example of this I know is Fritz Lang's Woman in the Window (1944). Dr. Wanley, a professor of criminology, has sent his family off for summer vacation. That night, Wanley meets a mysterious woman and goes to her apartment for drinks. When a man breaks in and attempts to kill him, Wanley kills the intruder. He conceals the crime. But since he is a close friend of the District Attorney, Wanley is forced to watch helplessly while the police patiently uncover the clues he left behind. The suspense is characteristic of the policier film, especially one told from the criminal's point of view. The film seems to resolve itself internally, when the police are satisfied that another man, now dead, committed the crime. But the film is not satisfied with this resolution, since Wanley is still guilty and goes unpunished. There occurs an abrupt volte-face. Wanley is awakened at his club; he has overslept; he has dreamed the entire story. But what worked in a comedy like Sh! The Octopus is stridently out of place in a crime thriller, and the resolution jars us by its triviality. The final scene, the epilogue, is even more problematic. When Wanley meets another woman in exactly the manner he had dreamed of meeting the first, he stammers and runs away. The epilogue is both comic and troubling, because it continues to violate the generic norm and because it suggests that Wanley's dream could actually occur.

Generic motivation can exist as the pressure of generic tradition on the particular film. There are also general dramaturgical sorts of motivation, and two of them are of particular importance for the ending. One is causal motivation, which makes the film's conclusion a logical consequence of earlier events. The example of Winchester 73 shows how both resolution and epilogue may be motivated causally. The problematic ending, then, tends to work against causality. The principal way that this happens is through chance or coincidence. Coincidence is no stranger to Hollywood dramaturgy, and it sometimes achieves the status of a generic convention (as in comedy or melodrama). On the whole, though, the orthodox practice is to insert coincidence early in the film, most often to trigger the main action; scenarists consider it unacceptable to let coincidence enter so late as to resolve the main action. It can, then, be a significant disruption if coincidence yields a happy ending. At its least distressing, this happy accident may be a sudden change of heart, as at the close of Frank Capra's Meet John Doe (1941). More disturbing is the uncaused resolution that borders on the miraculous. In Frank Borzage's

Seventh Heaven (1927), both an officer and a priest assure Diane that Chico died in the war. Suddenly, Chico arrives, blind but alive, and not only the timing but the officer's and priest's error itself remains completely unexplained; we cannot justify Chico's resurrection in causal terms.

There is also the problem of the unmotivated happy epilogue. The action has resolved itself in an acceptably logical manner, but the epilogue jars with that resolution. One could argue that the jocular, throwaway sunniness of the epilogue in Lang's Ministry of Fear (1944) is out of keeping with the grimness of the story that preceded it. Similarly, it is possible to see the visionary epilogue of John Ford's How Green Was My Valley (1941), in which nearly all the characters file past in atemporal purity, as a desperate attempt to escape the bleak impasse of the resolution. The best, and most frightening, example I know is Alfred Hitchcock's The Wrong Man (1956), which combines an uncaused resolution with two epilogues. Manny Balestrero is accused by several witnesses of robbing an insurance office. He and his wife Rose try vainly to establish his alibi, but they can find no one who can testify to Manny's innocence. Manny is almost certain to be convicted until, at his mother's suggestion, he prays. A Miracle occurs. As he prays, the real criminal attempts another robbery and is caught. Manny is saved, but his plight, which Hitchcock has presented through intensely subjective techniques, has taken its toll on his wife. Rose has become paranoid and Manny has put her in a sanitarium. In the film's epilogue, Manny goes to Rose and tells her he's free, but she is indifferent: "Nothing can help me. No one. You can go now." She has completely withdrawn from him. Although a nurse comforts Manny, Hitchcock fills the scene with a sense of complete loss. However grim, the epilogue is motivated causally. But now a second epilogue (and what must be the briefest happy ending in Hollywood cinema) corrects all that went before: a title appears on the screen assuring us that Rose was cured and that Manny's family is now living happily in Florida. In its final seconds, The Wrong Man pays outrageously perfunctory obeisance to our craving for the triumph of the just and the good. We are left not only dispirited but dissatisfied.

A second sort of internal motivation is that of coherent narrative point of view. Point of view

"The epilogue jars." Hitchcock's SUSPICION, with Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine, and THE WRONG MAN with Vera Miles, Henry Fonda, and Anthony Quayle.

in cinema is a complicated matter, but for my purposes here I shall take it to include not only particular techniques (e.g., optically subjective shots) but also the practice of focusing upon a character as the center of consciousness for an action. In The Big Sleep (1946), for example, all scenes are presented through the consciousness of the detective Philip Marlowe. He is present in every sequence, and all the information the audience gets about the narrative action passes through him. Confinement to the detective's point of view is itself a generic convention, but at the same time the restriction of point of view motivates the resolution internally: Marlowe solves the mystery on the basis of his information. The coherence of point of view assures a unified resolution.

The disturbingly happy ending would thus be one in which the coherence of point of view is undermined. The chief example would be Hitchcock's Suspicion (1941). Lina Aysgarth begins to mistrust her husband when she catches him in petty lying and theft. When the family friend Beaky is murdered, Lina starts to suspect that Johnny is guilty. Since there is no reason to doubt Johnny's guilt in the smaller matters, it is easy for Hitchcock to motivate Lina's suspicion. More important, Hitchcock rigorously confines our knowledge to Lina's point of view; Johnny is never seen outside her presence. When Lina learns that Johnny has been inquiring about poisons, she and we assume that she is his next victim. One evening he carries milk to her; she accepts it; fade out. But this is not the resolution. Lina awakes the next morning, and Johnny drives them along the coast. It appears that Johnny is about to push her out of the car, but -- here is the about-face -- he is actually trying to prevent her falling out. The resolution is accomplished: Johnny tells Lina that an unknown stranger killed Beaky, and that Johnny sought the poison because he wanted to commit suicide. He apologizes to her and vows to make a fresh start. They drive off together. The difficulty here is twofold. There is inadequate causal motivation, especially in the matter of Beaky's death at the hands of a conveniently anonymous stranger. More importantly, the point-of-view has been ruptured. Since we never see Johnny apart from Lina, we have only had his word for all his earlier misdemeanors, and other sources have shown him to be a liar. There is no reason for Lina or for us to trust his explanations now. Or rather, only one reason: the film stops.

"Two, drastically opposed endings." Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett in Lang's WOMAN IN THE WINDOW.

The unmotivated happy ending is of importance both aesthetically and ideologically. Hitchcock's, Ford's, and Lang's inadequate resolutions and epilogues constitute powerful formal devices. Part of their power lies in their capacity to create narrative disunity. Now it is possible to argue that classical Hollywood films cannot be wholly understood as unified art works, and to some extent this is true. Within a coherent narrative, there is also a drive toward accessory splendors and momentary effects (this suggests that popular film constitutes a rather complex aesthetic entity). Nonetheless, the disruptive happy ending goes beyond the rather limited looseness characteristic of many Hollywood films. Breakdowns in narrative unity typically occur in the middle sections of the classical film, when the action is slackened by a song, gags, or scenes of relatively unmotivated spectacle. By the film's end, however, we expect a fairly neat tying-up. The ending is typically, if mechanically, a moment of integration.

But the problematic films I have mentioned derive their force from swerving sharply off course, pressing toward one necessary conclusion only to deny it. In most classical films, the alternative resolutions of the action are only imagined possibilities; in these films, the director represents the protagonist's impending death or capture or the breakdown of a family with far greater vividness than he presents the resolution of the difficulty. One might say that films like You Only Live Once, Woman in the Window, The Wrong Man, and Suspicion present two, drastically opposed endings: one a logical outcome of the action, the other an arbitrary coda. This strategy introduces a problem of authorial attitude akin to irony but much more disruptive. For each type of motivation, the unmotivated ending calls attention to the very conventions that led us astray -- the assumption of consistent genre devices, of homogeneous causality, of coherent point of view. Properly exploited, the dissatisfaction we feel with an arbitrary ending can force us to recognize the conventions that rule classical cinema. Such films can become what Stephen Heath has called in literature "limit-works," those works that exist within the bounds of legibility and clear consumption and nonetheless "realize a certain transgressive force to the extent that they stage the very terms of those limits."[7]

The limits, finally, are also ideological. The happy ending, as we saw at the outset, has often been explained as simply an obedience to the audience's desires. "People," write John Emerson and Anita Loos in 1920, "do not want very tragic stories which depress them for the next twenty-four hours. Hence the necessity for a happy ending in most stories."[8] Some writers appeal to the audience's

sense of fair play. The happy ending, claims Frederick Palmer, is "nothing more or less than the balancing of justice, wherein retribution overtakes the guilty, and virtue and innocence are rewarded."[9] This is close to the convention of "poetic justice" as it appears in 17th and 18th century literary theory. Significantly, some of the films I've cited were felt to be problematic when they were made. Capra is said to have tested several different endings of Meet John Doe. Hitchcock claimed that he planned a more consistent ending for Suspicion that studio executives would not let him use. In "Happily Ever After," Lang admits that the dream ending of Woman in the Window was designed to avoid "a futile dreariness which an audience would reject."[10] Because of the filmmakers' skill in dramatizing the situation preceding the cursory resolution or epilogue, the arbitrary happy ending puts on display the demands of social institutions (censorship, studios) which claim to act as the delegates of audience desires. The happy ending is there, but to some extent the need for it is denounced.

This was, of course, one area which Brecht mined assiduously, as in Threepenny Opera's unmotivated rescue of MacHeath from the gallows:

> But as we want to keep our fingers clean
> And you are people we can't risk offending
> We thought we'd better do without this scene
> And substitute instead a different ending.
>
> Since this is opera, not life, you'll see
> Justice give way before Humanity.
> So now, to throw our story right off course,
> Enter the royal official on his horse.[11]

Brecht points out that the deus ex machina functions to restore a stability rooted in ideological preferences. In Threepenny Opera, the characters insist on the difference between art and life. "How nice everything would be," remarks Mrs. Peachum, "if these saviors on horseback always appeared when they were needed." No Hollywood film goes so far as to place a line like this in a character's mouth, but the unmotivated finale can, within the confines of popular cinema, take on a socially critical edge. In several of the films I have mentioned, for instance, the spectator is asked to assume an unusually critical position toward the law, and the happy resolutions and epilogues cannot entirely dispel an uneasiness about the workings of justice. In the context of Hollywood, it may be a productive act to dramatize the problem of what we will accept as a tolerable representation of society. If, as Brecht suggests, the happy ending guarantees "a truly undisturbed appreciation of the most intolerable conditions," then the problematic happy ending may start to disturb that Happiness and Optimism which Blackton considered typically American.[12] It may be more provocative for a film to end happily than unhappily if the happy ending flaunts the disparity between what we ask of art and what we know of social life.

# Notes

1) John C. Tibbetts, ed., Introduction to the Photoplay (Shawnee Mission, Kansas: National Film Society, Inc., 1977), 122-23.

2) J. Stuart Blackton, "The Happy Ending," The Motion Picture Director, 2, No.8 (March 1926), 3.

3) Frances Marion, How to Write and Sell Film Stories (New York: Covici, Friede, 1937), p.52. Italics mine.

4) Fritz Lang, "Happily Ever After," in Roger Manvell, ed., Penguin Film Review, No.5 (1948), p.25.

5) Ibid., p.29.

6) Marion, pp.85-86.

7) Stephen Heath, Vertige du déplacement (Paris: Fayard, 1974), p.104.

8) John Emerson and Anita Loos, How to Write Photoplays (Philadelphia: G.W. Jacobs and Co., 1920), pp.74-75.

9) Frederick Palmer, Palmer Plan Handbook (Hollywood: Palmer Photoplay Corp., 1921), p.71.

10) Lang, p.28.

11) Bertolt Brecht, Collected Plays, Vol.2, Eds. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Vintage, 1977), p.225.

12) Ibid., p.331.

"Happy resolutions and epilogues cannot entirely dispell and uneasiness about the workings of justice." Fonda and Sylvia Sidney in Lang's YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE.